

Executive Summary

How do Canadians feel about their country's democratic system of government and institutions today? How have opinions shifted in the past two years, if at all, in light of the major events over the past two years, including the increasingly divisive nature of Canadian politics?

Public confidence in the country's democratic institutions. In the broadest terms, Canadians continue to be generally positive about their system of government and democracy. And they remain among the most positive of citizens across the Americas in some respects (although not all). By and large, the public is proud of their country, maintains a strong belief in democracy as the best form of government, and continues to be generally (if not fully) satisfied with the way it is functioning.

The public's trust and confidence in the central institutions of government are decidedly more mixed, as has been the case in recent years. Canadians are most likely to trust the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP and the justice system (including the Supreme Court). But citizens think much less of the political system and institutions, with trust in both Parliament and the Prime Minister more negative than positive. Political parties earn the least respect, with only seven percent trusting them a lot, compared with 32 percent who have none at all. As well, many Canadians are concerned about the potential for illegal manipulation of election outcomes; public trust in elections in this country is no higher than in the USA and a number of Latin American countries.

The impact of the Harper mandate. The country has been governed by Stephen Harper's Conservative government since 2006, and his mandate has been marked by significant changes in government priorities and the emergence of partisanship and rancor not previously witnessed in Canadian politics. Have these developments had a visible impact on Canadian public opinion, values and priorities?

Close to nine years of Conservative government in Ottawa appears to be nudging Canadians' self-alignment along the political spectrum. As in past surveys a majority of Canadians

continue to place themselves in the political centre, but since 2010 there has been a 10 percentage point shift from the middle to the political right (which now comprises one-quarter of the population, compared with one in six who place themselves on the left). But this rise in the proportion that identify with the right is not accompanied by a noticeable shift in Canadians' attitudes or values in the direction of positions normally associated with that side of the political spectrum (e.g., on such issues as LGBT rights and tolerance for political dissent).

Commentators have written about Stephen Harper being a polarizing force in Canadian politics, and the survey results bear this out. Assessment of the Prime Minister's performance has been consistently divided, with one third voicing approval and one third expressing disapproval. He is strongly trusted by only one in six Canadians, compared with twice as many who express little or no trust. These results have been stable since 2010, and continue to place Stephen Harper among the least trusted national leaders in the hemisphere (in 2014 he rates above the leaders of Guyana, Costa Rica, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago).

At a broader level, there is evidence of a growing divide between those on the left and right of the political spectrum on some issues (e.g., trust in elections, belief that governments are listening to the people, income inequality). Canadians who identify with the right tend to be more positive about the country's institutions and the direction of the country, while those on the left have become visibly less satisfied with the state of democracy.

Public distrust of government and politics is clearly evident, but there are only minor indications of an emerging populism among Canadians. About one in ten continues to endorse the idea that people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives, although the proportion who clearly disagree has been shrinking steadily since 2008. The public is more likely than not to feel that MPs in Ottawa should vote according to what they believe, even when this may not reflect the majority view of their constituents, or the position of their own party.

Balance of powers in Canadian democracy. One of the most significant changes in the country's national political system has been the shifting balance power among central institutions, away from Parliament in favour of the Prime Minister's Office and the Supreme Court. This issue has some resonance with the public, as Canadians are more likely to believe it is the Prime Minister, rather than Parliament or the Supreme Court, that currently wields too much power; however, a significant proportion does not see an imbalance. Predictably, opinions are shaped in large part by Canadians' political orientation and party preference, with concerns about too much power in the hands of the Prime Minister most evident among those on the political left.

The public's endorsement of democratic principles outweighs its distaste for partisan bickering, with few Canadians supporting the idea that the Prime Minister should be able to limit the voices of opposition parties, and this view has been stable since 2010. Over the same period, however, a small but growing minority believe there may be justification in suspending normal democratic functioning when the country is facing difficult times, in terms of the Prime Minister governing without the other central institutions. Close to one in four would accept such a scenario in the case of closing down Parliament, making Canadians among the most likely of citizens across the Americas to endorse this view, behind those living in Paraguay, Peru and Haiti.

Unlike most Parliamentary democracies, Canada has little experience with coalition governments, and the attempt by federal opposition parties to join together to unseat the recently re-elected Conservative government in 2008 demonstrated at that time that the public was not ready to embrace this change in Parliamentary tradition. As the country approaches the next general election in 2015, an increasing majority of Canadians now accept the legitimacy of coalition government, although fewer than half continue to believe this can involve the second and third place parties joining forces to take power from the party winning the most seats.

Tolerance for political dissent. The public's continued faith in the country's democracy is also manifested in a sustained belief in the importance of free speech and the right to openly criticize governments, provided it remains within the bounds of the law. Most Canadians continue to reject

the idea that those who disagree with prevailing views represent a threat to the country, and an increasing majority believe it is legitimate to participate in legal demonstrations for political purposes. By comparison, there is limited public acceptance of extra-legal forms of protest such as blocking roads, although the breadth of disapproval is down noticeably over the past two years. Canadian public views on these issues are generally comparable to opinions elsewhere across the Americas.

Most Canadians acknowledge that it is important for their governments to collect personal information from citizens to guard against security threats. But a significant minority (almost four in ten) also believe that such activity is bad for democracy, and seven in ten would consider government surveillance of their own telephone and Internet activity to be a violation of their privacy, with this view most strongly held by younger Canadians.

Protection of human rights. Across the Americas, Canadians are among the most positive about the protection of their basic rights, including the right to a fair trial (in notable contrast to the views expressed in the USA), although only a minority are strongly confident in these protections. Across the hemisphere, Canadians stand out as the most widely supportive of LGBT rights, with an increasing majority favouring the right for individuals within this community to run for public office and to marry one another. This is in sharp contrast with opinions across most of Latin America, where opposition to LGBT rights remains widespread, especially in Central America and the Caribbean.

Citizen engagement. Canadians' involvement with politics tends to be more as spectators than as active participants. Only one in six have participated in a meeting of a political party or other organization in the past year, well below the level reported in the USA and in such countries as Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. At the same time, Canadians are actively engaged in their communities in other ways. Civic engagement more broadly defined has increased since 2012, with this trend most evident among the country's youngest generation of adults, as well as among those born in another country. More than half of the population reports having been active in the past year in the form of signing petitions, sharing political information online or participating in demonstrations and protest marches.

Although voter turnout at elections has been tracking downward, Canadians continue to acknowledge that voting is an important component of citizenship. An increasing majority believe that voting represents a duty rather than a choice, and this view has strengthened across all age cohorts (although a generational gap between young and old remains). Notably, it is Canadians who make up the Millennial generation, not their parents and grandparents, who are most open to making it mandatory for everyone to vote in federal elections.

Local quality of life. Most Canadians continue to be positive about the quality of life where they live. Despite tight government budgets and a growing infrastructure “deficit”, there is rising public satisfaction with the quality of services provided at the municipal level (Canadians are among the most positive in the Americas, even with notable improvement in many other countries over the past two years). As before, Canadians (along with Americans) are least apt to report bribery requests from police or local officials, although perceptions of government corruption have grown since 2012, primarily in Montreal and western Canada.

Perceptions of personal safety are also at an all time high, with crime victimization rates down from 2012, and among the lowest in the hemisphere. The proportion that feel very safe in their neighbourhood has increased since 2012, in contrast to a declining trend almost everywhere else in the hemisphere. Close to nine in ten Canadians are somewhat if not very satisfied with the protection being provided by local police, in sharp contrast with opinions expressed in most of Latin America. Not surprisingly, Canadians are less likely than citizens in any other country to feel others in their community are untrustworthy.

Economic security and well-being. While the Canadian economy has yet to fully regain the momentum lost during the global recession of 2008-09, the public is more positive than negative about the country’s economic situation and this confidence has been gradually improving since 2010. Citizens are twice as likely to describe their own financial circumstances as good rather than as bad, also up marginally over the past two years.

At the same time, many Canadians continue to struggle to make ends meet, with four in ten reporting their household income is not sufficient (rising to two-thirds among those with incomes under \$30K). The survey results confirm that income is a key determinant to overall life satisfaction in Canada, and more so than in most of Latin America where economic security is lower but life satisfaction is higher.

Canadians look to government to safeguard the economic security of its citizens, but this is less in the form of job creation than in addressing issues of fairness and access to opportunities. There continues to be strong public support for government policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and poor, and this view is evident across the country although most prevalent in eastern Canada, among those with lower incomes and those on the political left. Public support for government intervention in this area is strong across much of the Americas, with the notable exceptions of the USA, Venezuela and Panama.